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SUBJECT: OLD AND NEW RUB TOGETHER IN VOTER REGISTRATION IN
PAKTYA

11. (SBU) Summary: The dry, spare southeastern province of Paktya, bordering on Pakistan, retains a solid social framework of Pashtun tribes and traditional values. Its inhabitants are also eager to win their fair share of political representation and development dollars in the new order. As the old and the new jostle together, Paktya is making bumpy progress in preparing for the presidential and provincial council elections in 2009.

THIS TIME, SIGNING UP TO VOTE FOR SURE

12. (SBU) Provincial Electoral Officer (PEO) Amir Hamza Khan is clear: "The voter registration process is going well," he says. As of November 28, 105,232 new voters had joined Paktya's rolls, a total for Phase 2 that is second only to the vastly more populous province of Kabul. All 18 sites in Paktya's 11 districts are open; deployable teams are responding to remote communities' requests for greater voter registration opportunities; and no violence has marred the process. As in other provinces, electoral officials have negotiated with community leaders to allow registration workers to travel safely to troubled areas, of which Paktya has any number. PRTOFF and EMBOFF on November 29 and 30 visited about 25 per cent of Paktya's voter registration sites, in rural Sayed Karam and Ahmad Abad districts as well as downtown Gardez, and saw voters and registration staff at work.

13. (SBU) Paktya's voters have responded with zest to diverse methods of public outreach. Local and electoral officials report that they played drums, visited parks and mosques, and manned loudspeaker trucks as part of the civic education campaign. Provincial and district officials have enthusiastically promoted voter registration throughout the process. Governor Hamdard set the tone, hosting a large shura in Gardez November 3 for about 150 tribal elders and district officials to encourage people to get out and register. Local representatives of the Pashtun-centric Hizb-e-Islami party said November 26 that they planned to send a party letter to encourage members to register.

14. (SBU) A variety of people posit that, because few of Paktya's citizens voted in the last election, the province is under-represented in the legislature, allowing the central government to neglect Paktya. (In 2005 turnout in Paktya was modest after registration had been high; international election workers suspected registration fraud.) This low participation is a mistake, Paktyans say, they are determined to correct. "I saw a man who weighed 200 kilos, and a woman who was 100 years old" come to register, twinkled Ahmad Gul, a registration worker in Ahmad Abad. "Everyone wants to

vote."

ADDRESSING VOTER INTIMIDATION AND IRREGULARITIES

¶5. (SBU) PEO Hamza Khan acknowledges, however, that Taliban efforts to intimidate voters have kept turnout low in Zormat district, in the south. "People call me and say they want to register, but that they are afraid," he said. On November 30 Hamza Khan reported that Taliban fighters forced five voters in Zormat to eat their new registration cards. Earlier, Taliban in Zormat broadcast threats from loudspeaker trucks and checked passers-by for signs of the fingerprint ink used in registration. Turnout recently has picked up slightly, Hamza Khan added. "People pretend they are going to the clinic, and then come and register," he said. Hamza Khan and the province's Afghan National Army (ANA) chief are coordinating future ANA maneuvers and the retrieval of voter materials from Zormat.

¶6. (SBU) Irregularities in registration of women is another flaw in Paktya's process, and reportedly also in neighboring Logar province. A UNAMA field officer on November 27 cited credible reports that in Paktya men provided lists of women's names to registration workers and received voter cards in return. In keeping with traditions that exclude women from public places, the women never appeared at the registration site to prove their identity or provide fingerprints. At a women's registration site in Sayed Karam on November 29, EMBOFF observed a registration worker apparently preparing

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cards from a hand-written list, with no women present.

¶7. (SBU) PEO Hamza Khan is aware of such irregularities and claims to be working to resolve them, although local UNAMA staff believe problems are more pervasive than he admits. The PEO has met with FEFA, the Afghan NGO leading election observation efforts, and checked through its short list of irregularities. He has tried to smooth over complaints from provincial council members about an overbearing electoral official in Ahmad Khel district. Hamza Khan deployed a team to register recent returnees from Pakistan in their settlement outside Gardez, rather than accept a proffered list of new returnee voters. When told of the incident at a women's site in Sayed Karam, Hamza Khan noted he had already received a phone call from the site's staff, and planned to follow up.

TRADITION AND CHANGE, BENEFITS AND COSTS

¶8. (SBU) Paktya's mix of traditional tribal ways and new democratic institutions is producing uneven results, and its citizens and leaders appear to still be sorting out the advantages and disadvantages of each for the future. PEO Hamza Khan meets weekly with his counterparts in the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army to plan and coordinate on security for voter registration; the principal topic on November 30, for example, was retrieval of completed voter materials, and the discussion was productive.

¶9. (SBU) At the same time, IEC headquarters is considering authorizing provincial election officials to also work with tribal security forces (arbakai) in Paktya for the completion of Phase 2, and Paktika and Khost for Phase 3. A provincial council member on November 27 insisted that such tribal forces would be key to security on voting day next year; a local official in Ahmad Abad likewise endorsed their effectiveness, citing cooperation between tribal forces and the police on border control. In fact, in the run-up to voter registration and as it progresses, Paktya's security forces, government leaders, and tribal elders have consistently

maintained that arbakai are essential to securing the process.

¶10. (SBU) As for how this traditional society copes with the demands for women's participation, the IEC found women to staff the voter registration sites in downtown Gardez, but had to fall back to using elderly men, and one widow, in the rural areas of Sayed Karam and Ahmad Abad. It is not clear how much such adaptations affect women's turnout, nor whether the observed irregularities in registration of women represent clumsy attempts at fraud, or a compromise on procedure to meet traditional social norms.

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